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Photograph by David Heller

**Emotional Baggage** : Rep. Mike Honda (right) speaks regarding airport baggage screeners at the Northside Community Center while Ben Menor (left) the executive director of the Northside, looks on during a town hall meeting on Feb. 19.

## Baggage Screamers

Noncitizen baggage security workers get personal with Norman Y. Mineta

By Allie Gottlieb

DRIVING TO Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport is an exercise in urban stress. It means dodging distracted drivers scanning for the right terminal, maintaining your lane position against weaving cabs and aggressive shuttles--and nowadays, for an extra thrill, having your car searched at the parking lot entrance. It almost doesn't matter where in the country you are or where you've come from--city airports are similar loops of tension.

The United States' recent move to federalize airport baggage security has only made this situation worse--on the inside as well as the outside. Things are so busy at San Jose International Airport that officials there haven't even gotten around to putting up their new sign honoring local Asian American political hero Norman Y. Mineta, currently serving as U.S. secretary of transportation.

But on Tuesday, Feb. 19, members of a vocal crowd in the airport parking lot certainly knew the name Mineta.

## Mineta's Airport

"Why are we mad? We're mad because--what is this airport called? Norm Mineta airport," SEIU organizer Shaw San Lui shouted through a vaguely amplified bullhorn by the flagpoles outside San Jose's airport. Interestingly, the day chosen for this demonstration, Feb. 19, was the Day of Remembrance, the 60th anniversary of the day when President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the internment of every person of Japanese descent.

Now the date also marks a battle against another American struggle with residents whom the government considers foreigners: the noncitizen immigrants working security inside our airports.

"Today, at his airport, hundreds of people stand to lose their jobs," Lui continued. Hometown hero Mineta, she pointed out to the crowd, is an Asian American who has reached "one of the highest levels of government." Meanwhile, "down here, people are getting screwed."

Behind the protesting, simultaneously staged at San Jose, Oakland and San Francisco airports, lies outrage over a regulation in the new Aviation and Transportation Security Act that

requires airport baggage screeners to be U.S. citizens. The act, Public Law Number 107-71, signed by President George W. Bush on Nov. 19, is a sweeping move to take authority over airport baggage screeners away from private, profit-driven companies and hand it over to the federal government. Screeners become like postal workers, federal civil service employees. That's where the citizenship requirement, over which the ACLU is suing Mineta and his second in command, comes in.

An estimated 100 people showed up for the drizzly two-hour rally at San Jose International Airport. Among them were bouncy activist students from Stanford and San Jose State University and impassioned Filipino and workers' rights groups. They toted signs that read, "No to racism" and "Job security equals airport security," and they chanted, "Firing immigrants is a shame. Noncitizens are not to blame."

San Jose City Councilmember Chuck Reed was also there, wearing a flashy American flag tie. Reed was the only dissenting vote on the council last November when the city decided to rename the airport after Mineta.

The name choice seems logical since Mineta was reared on San Jose politics. He was a member of the City Council from 1967 to 1971 and the country's first Asian American mayor from 1971 to 1974; he then served 20 years as a U.S. congressman for Silicon Valley. On a larger scale, Mineta was the first Asian American to land in the president's cabinet, first as the secretary of commerce under President Bill Clinton and then as secretary of transportation under President Bush. Also notably, as a kid, Mineta was interned by Roosevelt's order.

In 1988, as a congressman, he received national

attention for getting the promise of reparations and an apology from the U.S. government for citizens who were interned during World War II.

But Reed said he thought naming the airport after Mineta wasn't the best way to honor the former local councilmember, mayor and congressman. Now, while Reed does not blame Mineta for the law that could cost nearly 200 Mineta Airport workers their jobs, the conflicted symbolism of the formerly interned top Asian American official's name isn't lost on him.

"It's an irony that [Mineta is] being asked to carry out an act that penalizes people solely for not being a citizen," Reed said.

## Silent Screeners

San Jose screeners don't want to talk publicly about their impending job doom. When asked to comment, one screener hustled into the airport bathroom and appeared never to come out.

"There are snitches around," confides Pablo Romero, Philip Veracruz Justice Project organizer. He says San Jose screeners express fear that their employer will retaliate if they speak publicly. Romero was also turned down when he asked a screener in Tagalog to comment. He said he's talked with around 15 San Jose screeners. "We're trying to reach out to San Jose right now because they're the last piece of the puzzle."

Romero's group compelled one screener to make an anonymous statement. The screener, who moved to this country in 1996 with his family, said the law "sounds to me like it's wrong." He points out that it seems hypocritical for the federal government to employ noncitizen National Guards to work airport

security, armed, next to the baggage screeners whom it intends to fire.

The unnamed screener is one of San Jose airport's 75 percent who lack citizenship; San Jose's noncitizen screeners make up 183 out of the airport's 245. Filipinos comprise about 90 percent of the 183. Globe Security, the folks in charge of San Jose's red-blazered baggage screeners, can fire these people anytime. But according to an aide in U.S. Rep. Mike Honda's office (D-San Jose), San Jose screeners probably won't start seeing pink slips until July.

Rally-goer Councilman Reed is trying to get the city to do some damage control. He wants San Jose to join forces with the state and cough up support for the screeners in the form of job-hunting help, displacement pay and faster immigration and family-reunification processes.

"I'm concerned about firing a couple hundred people at San Jose airport," Reed told *Metro* during a phone interview the day before the rally, "with no severance pay, no training, no benefits, nothing provided to them. It's a national policy, and they got caught in the middle."

Reed asked Ben Menor, head of both the Northside Community Center and the Filipino-American Opportunities Development Council, to present the City Council with ways to help screeners. Menor, who says the law causes both civil-rights and social-service problems, outlined suggestions for the city. His recommendations include city support for transitional job counseling and citizenship classes.

## Defending the Norm

Mineta has been noticeably silent since his department began enforcing federalized security

a few weeks ago. Mineta and his staffers did not return *Metro's* repeated calls to his D.C. office.

Mineta has spoken up at times about his internment. For instance, he "vowed to work to make sure that kind of injustice could never happen to anyone else," Clinton said once after hiring Mineta. And in 2000, Mineta assured UC-Berkeley's graduating class that, "with all its imperfections, America was becoming a country of inclusion." That, he said, was what he learned from his three-year internment and subsequent release.

He's also been ridiculed by conservatives for being too sympathetic to people of Arab descent since 9/11.

Today, by comparison, Mineta's friends are more vocal than he is about the immigrant screeners.

"The bottom line is, he's not one that votes," Rep. Honda said about Mineta, after speaking at a lengthy but sparsely attended town hall meeting at San Jose's Northside Community Center the evening of Feb. 19.

Honda makes a good point. Mineta didn't get to vote on the law. Honda did. He voted yes. Twice. He voted yes when the security bill passed the House unanimously on Nov. 6 and when it cleared a final congressional vote by a 410-9 margin on Nov. 16 to become law.

Rumor has it that Honda, incidentally also a former internee, meets Mineta every Friday for breakfast. Ernest Baynard, a spokesperson for Honda, wouldn't confirm the existence of the Friday meetings, but verified that the two officials are close.

Honda says that as a congressman who's in touch with the mistreated immigrant experience

he's best equipped to represent Asian noncitizens being batted around by the system because "I hear what they are saying more clearly."

Honda blames Republicans for the controversial security act because some of them demanded the citizenship requirement. He also credits the need for haste in passing *something*.

"We had to make a decision," Honda said. "We can't allow [baggage screening] to be in the hands of private companies." He is now among the handful of legislators trying to pass a pair of bills that would help rescue some noncitizen screeners. Both are still pending.

Honda signed onto H.R. 3505, a bill sponsored by Rep. Hilda Solis (D-Los Angeles), a companion to one introduced by Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), which would let screeners keep their jobs while their citizenship applications are pending and would expedite the application process. Of course, that wouldn't affect the citizenship requirement itself. It also wouldn't do anything for screeners whose applications aren't pending because, say, they haven't lived in the United States for five years yet or they're being subjected to the complicated U.S. immigration rules for Filipinos who want to see their families again.

Honda also signed onto Rep. Major Owens' (D-N.Y.) H.R. 3690, which would mandate that "individuals who are eligible to join the Armed Forces of the United States are also eligible to be security-screening personnel." As it stands, soldiers don't have to be U.S. citizens.

Like Honda, local Asian group activists are watching Mineta's back. "On the issue of racism, on the issue of civil rights, Norm's record is unquestionable," Randy Okamura said. Okamura, chair of the Asian Pacific

Islander Caucus of the state Democratic Party, said that despite his D.C. station, Mineta is still a part of the local community. Okamura saw Mineta last in February at the transportation secretary's 70th birthday party.

"Let's face it," Okamura added, pointing out that Mineta reports to the president, "Norm's the only Democrat in a Republican administration."

Honda puts it another way.

"He could be powerful now," Honda said of Mineta. "He has the ear of the president."

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